

May 2021

The Undiscovered Country

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THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Luke A. Atkinson
B.F.A., Winthrop University, 2009
August 2021

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my family – Mom and Dad; Jennifer, Joe, Saoirse, Gwyn, and Dainan; Will; Ed, Maile, and Max; Brother Angelus; and Peter and Naomi.

To my friends – it would not be possible or worth it without you.

To my committee – Denyce Celentano, Ed Smith, Lynne Baggett, and William Ma.

To Orangey Allensworth Beauregard Thibodeaux.

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ABSTRACT

The Undiscovered Country is a compendium of paintings, prose, and poetry that defines the place of creation. This work is a response to life as I find it, in as honest and truthful a way as my ability allows. Sergei Prokofiev said, “The more the sea rages, the more precious a hard rock among the waves becomes.” My paintings are solid rocks that I cling to. Hopefully, someone else can too.

THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

Prose

As a painter, I find it helpful to maintain a degree of skepticism when it comes to the relationship between language, writing, and painting. If the painting cannot do the heavy lifting on its own, then it would be a mistake to try and make up the difference with writing. The map is not the territory and the language is not the image. If we are reading a map, we are not observing the landscape, the territory, in front of us. It is the same for language and visual art. Language can deaden art. Language gives the artist the illusion of control and the audience an excuse to stop looking. Gauguin put it well, “The best thing would be to hold my tongue.” However, he did not hold his tongue and there is at least one painter on Earth who is thankful for that.

This paper finds the ground on which language can speak to my work in a meaningful way. To that end, there are two sections – the current section of prose which is followed by a poem illustrated or augmented with paintings.

I find the situation of a ‘dinner party’ to be a helpful metaphor for the process of painting. To make the most of a good dinner party, guests need to listen to the conversation and remain attentive to different points of view. From my own experience, when I am at my best, I strive to keep my mind and senses alive and awake in order to discern the true and relevant voices from the false, complacent, and coercive. It is the same with painting – by listening and looking, by keeping my mind, eyes, and ears open, I can more honestly understand myself, my experience, and my place within life.

This all sounds very general, but it is important to see the forest for the trees, the general before the specific. It all begins with the big-picture point of view. The significance of the smallest entity on earth is only grasped if I can hold in my mind its place within the larger scheme of things. The universe exists in a grain of sand, in Morandi's vase, and in de Staël's rectangle. For true freedom and autonomy to exist within the act of creation, I must not burden it with any baggage or agenda. The act is fueled by wonder. An understanding of not only my place, but the place of everything else within the universe is essential to this.

With that said, I will now speak specifically on my paintings. I will focus on a group of still-life compositions that exists within the larger exhibition and can be examined on their own. They are: *Interior with Predator Drone*, *Still Life with Chanterelle*, *Bonnard Blue*, *Jam and Tartan*, *Wildflowers and Weeds*, *Cherry Oh*, *Afternoon*, *Lebanese Still Life*, *Vase with Lemon*, and *Still Life with Head (Raw Deal)*.

These paintings are in some way a product of this past year of quarantine, lockdowns, Phases I through IV, and other COVID-related happenings. However, I cannot speak clearly on the relationship, because it was not consciously considered. I do know that these paintings are the result of turning inward and becoming interested in what I am surrounded by. They are about objects and their inherent ability to explore internal and external relationships.

I have moved frequently throughout my life and have noticed that as objects move from place to place, they retain the ability to project their own unique kind of reality, sensibility, and ethic onto their surroundings. Every object is an individual entity. Within the paintings, I gather myriad entities, rescuing them from life's great rubbish heap, and examine all of their intertwined relationships. They do not exist in

isolation. I collect them from anywhere I come across them – real, physical objects are met with objects cut from photographs, objects screen-captured from films and social media, and objects sketched from life. I am interested in how they work or do not work together – how their respective details, shapes, colors, patterns, and reactions to light and shadow have an effect on one another.

As this body of work developed, the figure came into it and changed the perspective, shifting it to something that discovered ways in which we view ourselves, our relationships to one another, and our existence within the greater world, as in *Interior with Predator Drone* [page 14]. Handling the figure as another object, as in *Still Life with Head (Raw Deal)* [page 19], was an opportunity to find out what happens when everything exists on an even playing field, when the instinct to emphasize or empathise with the human figure is ignored.

There are a few ideas I have resonated as I pursue this body of work. They have been of some assistance in perceiving these still-life compositions within a larger context. When you build a wooden boat, there is a way to build it that is specific to each body of water. Boats built to work on the Chesapeake Bay have a completely different sensibility than those built for the Mississippi or Hudson River. Their design is shaped by external forces – the strength of the current, the depth, the composition of the water, the availability of wood, and so on. In the exact same way, space, time, culture, and audience determine every component of an object.

There is also a pseudoscientific theory called the Stone Tape Theory. It says that mental and emotional impressions can be projected or recorded onto objects under certain conditions. I cannot test the veracity of this, but I do know that I can look at an object and feel some sort of energy from it. At the very least, it is an interesting thought

experiment and helps me consider objects that may be deemed part of our disposable culture more closely.

Finally, there is the 1970's Rhizomatic Theory of philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. Within the realm of these paintings, it simply means the understanding of multiple, concurrent, non-hierarchical relationships that exist between nodes, or in this case, objects. This allows me to work with multiple objects and find relationships between all of them that might not be clear at first.

These paintings brought me closer in understanding and empathy with the things that I surround myself with and the myriad decisions that they embody. But, at the end of the day, when the moment of creation comes, all of the above will not help me. In fact, it can drive a wedge between me and the work in front of me. My mind must be cleared of the detritus of the other's thoughts and yesterday's worries. I must be in the immediate present and nothing else. The only thing that can keep me going and assist in the work is a sense of wonder with what I am faced with. This foundational perspective is important no matter whether I am working on a still life with flowers, a live oak by the Mississippi, a portrait of a friend, an abstract collage, an imagined dreamscape, or a monumental Elvis head.

With that said, I have been searching for a way in which language can touch upon the creative act without killing it or pigeonholing it. I have studied different strategies for handling this relationship between image and language and it has led me from 16th century emblemata to Victor Burgin, from William Blake's *oeuvre* to Bertolt Brecht's *War Primer*.

Through all of this, the conclusion is that there are things language cannot touch in the exact same way that there are things images cannot touch. What follows is a poem

(from which this thesis and exhibition takes its title) augmented by images of my paintings. Perhaps, together, they can start to define the borders of the mind and the motivations behind my work. But, it is still an undiscovered country.

Poem



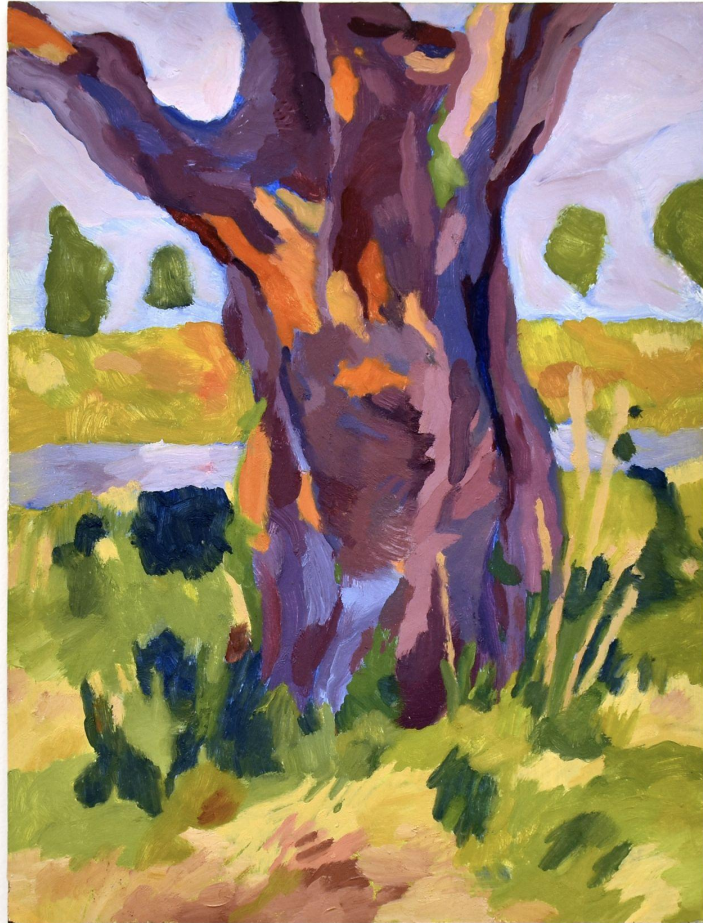
The River of Song

Crumb of soil and water

Held by gravity

In the as-far-as-we-know

Endless Vacuum



East of the Mississippi

This will be home

Points God, *This will do*

To the dust

For you, just fine



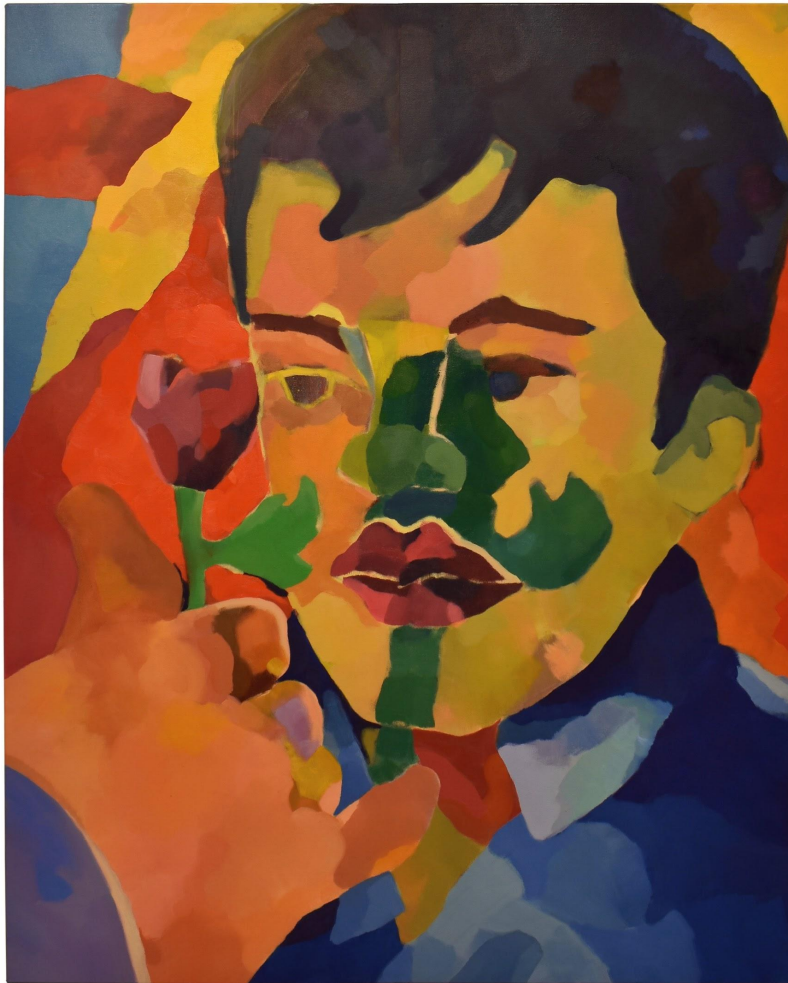
Take the Long Road and Walk It

This will hold

All your discourse

And dreams

And intercourse and love



Memphis Flash

All your Odysseus and Elvis

And Ponzis, Audubons,

Parkers and Larkins

Get a plot



The Sacrifice Forest

Out of Heaven's wild creation

Earth's perfect chaos

Lit by torches

Scrapes as it rises



Interior with Predator Drone

Posted and linteled

Steeled and glassed

Cities of New Yoricks

Crowds of easy dreams



A New Year in Bushwick (Europa)

Surround us

Cleared, built, leveled, built

Grandfathered-in, present

Plate glass patterned



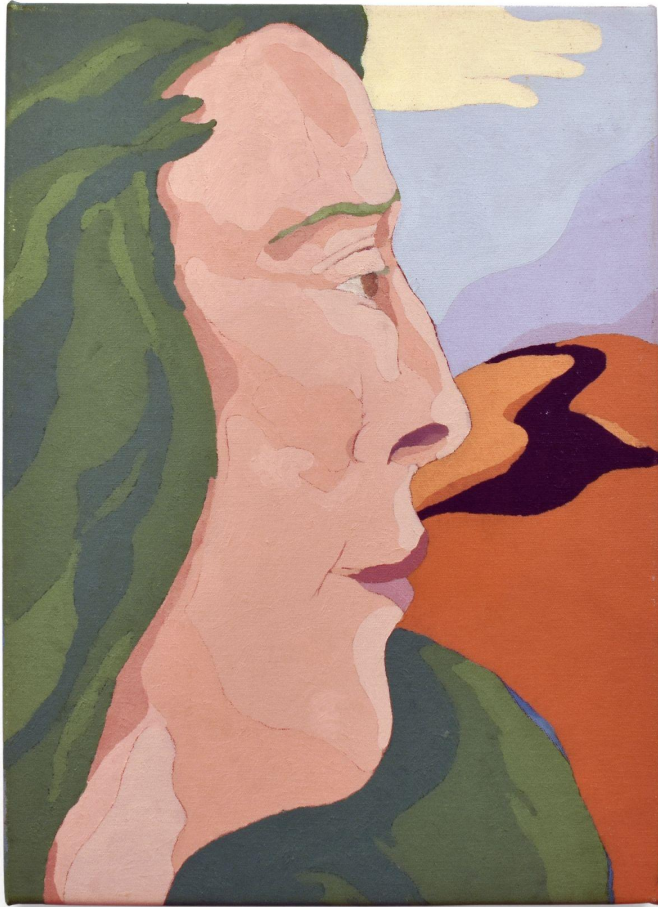
Behind Swine Palace

With swift's shadows

At last disrupt migration

Wires on a bird

Cut the wind in two



The Desert

Light gathers likeminds

Warmth illuminates reason

Keeps monsters at bay

At first



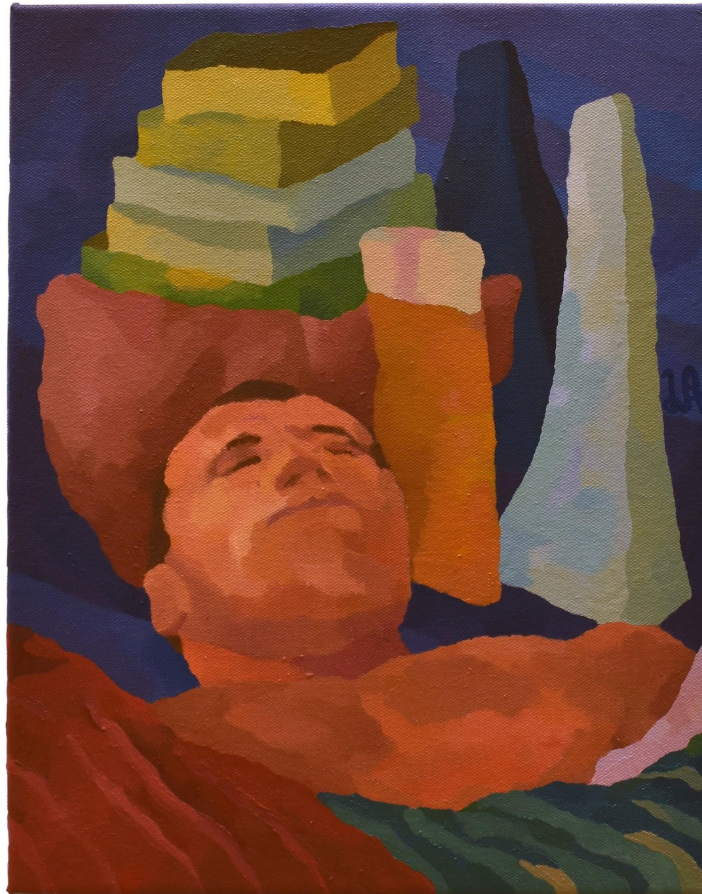
Summer Solstice MMXX

But the light

Electric for the profitable

Illuminates itself in

Epileptic spectacle



Still Life with Head (Raw Deal)

Bright pollution

Easy times shine

Straw diamonds draw

Flocks of Legion



For Anna

Clearing their voice

The Doubts undermine

But what is it

Good for?



Traiteur (Syd Horn)

Blinded and jostled

The world hidden

In a grain behind plastic

At the bottom of a bottle



We Could All Be So Lucky

Convenient constellations

Burning sworling skies

Navigate profit

On Earth



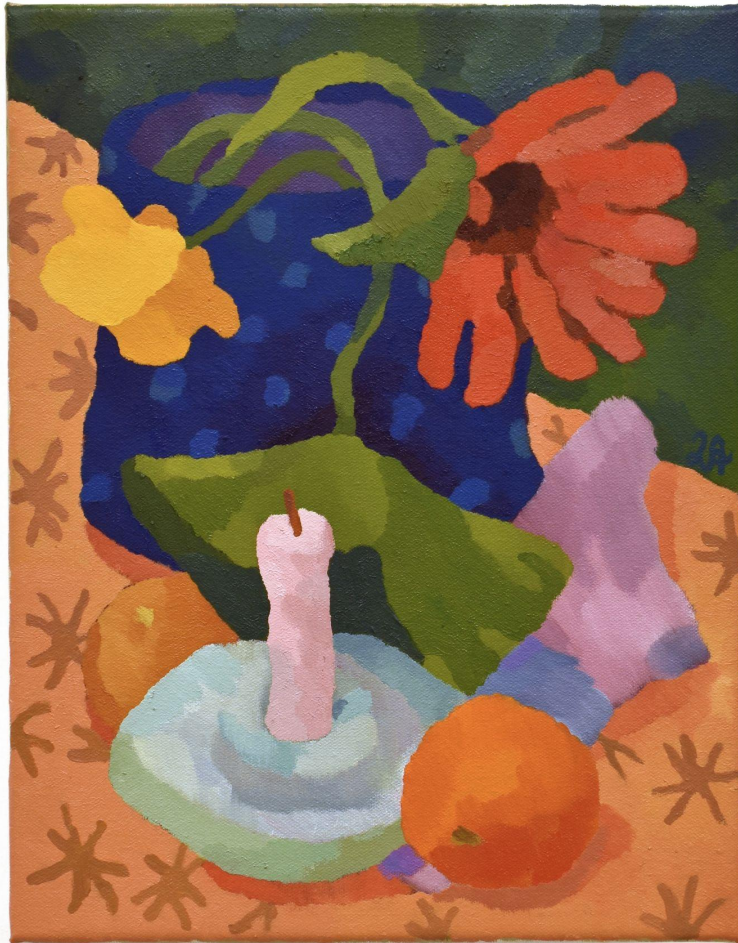
They Cut Her Down

Screaming Electric Wind

Behind the fire, darkness

Steady Polaris

Never left us



Afternoon

What cannot be counted
Is safe in the calm
Where the song, the call
Is perfected

VITA

Luke Alex Atkinson grew up on Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick, Canada. He earned his BFA at Winthrop University and continued his training at the New York Academy of Art, Art Students League of New York, Grand Central Atelier, and Russian Academy of Arts. Recently, he held a solo show at *Rat Trap* in Bogotá, Colombia, and his work was featured in *New American Paintings*. He plans to receive his Master of Fine Arts with a concentration in Painting from Louisiana State University in August 2021.

Atkinson makes paintings that engage with specific memories, dreams, and lived experience – always inspired by the potential for discovery found in form, space, and surface. He synthesizes art historical references and contemporary technique to create a visual language that speaks to today and expresses a unified vision.